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Michael Purcell

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NEC TAMEN CONSUMEBATUR.
Exodus 3 and the Non-Consumable Other
in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

by The Rev. Michael Purcell

BREVARD Childs, reflecting on the significance of *Exodus 3* in the history of theology, comments:

In the history of Christian theology most of the major theological problems have entered into the discussion of Exodus 3. In the early and medieval periods the interest focused on the issue of ontology and divine reality; in recent years on revelation as history or history as revelation. The amazing fact is how seminal this one passage continues to be for each new generation.¹

What insights can be gleaned from the account of the encounter between God and Moses for theology today? The purpose of this paper is to show how *Exodus 3* can be considered as a *locus classicus* for understanding, not simply the encounter between God and Moses, but the dynamic of all inter-personal encounter on the human level. In particular, the image of the bush which burns without being eaten up provides an exodus from the consumptive and reductive approach to the person which is so prevalent today. However, if theology and philosophy are to provide an adequate defence of the person, giving him or her a place beyond the circle of economic activity, then these also must develop beyond their subject-centred thinking. The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and biblical imagery, seems to me to provide a positive way to go beyond the economics of consumption and the egological domination of the world which has dominated Western thinking for so long. Only when the subject is decentred will we have a theology which does justice to, and provides justice for, the other person who stands opposed to

¹B. S. CHILDS, *Exodus*, SCM Press, London, 1987, p.88.

us.² Ultimately, a person cannot be presented in terms of economics, but in terms of *responsibility*.

Moses and the burning bush: a preliminary reflection.

... (he) came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. (Ex.3:1–2 RSV)

The encounter, as told in Exodus 3, presents a number of elements which lend themselves to developing a non-consumptive understanding of the human person which both founds personal subjectivity and respects the difference of the other.

- (i) The *interruption* of Moses' ordinary activity by the fire from the midst of the bush.
- (ii) The curiosity and *fascination* of Moses in the presence of the bush.
- (iii) The voice from the bush *addresses* Moses.
- (iv) Moses *responds*.
- (v) The maintained distance between Moses and the bush, and the holiness of the place.

In short, the initiative originates from a source other than Moses, and Moses has to be appreciated as essentially passive before the bush. Speaking of this encounter, Childs employs Gressman's classic formulation: 'The discoverer (*Entdecker*)

²One might question the legitimacy of employing scripture as a basis for philosophical reflection with the danger of a weakening of the rigour of philosophical thinking. But perhaps Emmanuel Levinas is correct to say: 'At no moment did the Western philosophical tradition in my eyes lose its right to the last word; everything must, indeed, be expressed in its tongue; but perhaps it is not the place of the first meaning of beings, the place where meaning begins.' (*Ethics and Infinity*, p.24–25) The first place of meaning is in the encounter which takes place between two people. Insofar as the text of *Exodus 3* is the encounter par excellence between two people who maintain themselves in separation and distinction one from the other it is an original source of meaning which is food for reflection not only on the theological level, but also on the philosophical level.

has become the discovered (*Entdeckte*).³ As a fusion of two traditions, the account has been seen as one in which 'Moses the "discoverer of God" in the local etiology becomes the "discovered by God" in the call',⁴ and the theological significance is that of a God who is always with us as prevenient grace, a 'God whose reality has not been discovered but revealed'.⁵ The terms of the relationship are reversed. 'The initiative is shifted from Moses to God.'⁶ It is this reversal which is the key for developing a proper anthropology, for in place of the egological and dominating subject, we propose a responsive and responsible subject whose very subjectivity is called forth by an other who is always and already prior.

Moses does not go in search of his experience. In fact, he is presented 'as totally oblivious even to the possibility of the confrontation to follow'.⁷ He finds himself in the presence of the bush, a *mysterium fascinans*, which attracts him and draws him closer. Upon his approach, he is addressed. For Childs, this address has *prophetic* significance. It is not simply another call narrative in which God makes himself manifest. 'The patriarchs received revelation in theophanies, but had no commission to transmit a message to others.... Moses' call recounts *the deep disruptive seizure* of a man.'⁸ The prophetic word first of all comes from God and disrupts Moses, so that, his life having been re-ordered he can, in his turn, be disruptive of the lives of others through his announcing the prophetic word he has received. Writing of the power of and the nature of eschatological prophecy, Levinas says that its import

³B. CHILDS, *op.cit.*, p.54 It is not my purpose to enter into the debate over the various levels and traditions which are incorporated into this story, but to take the text as it stands. Childs terms 'insightful' the early work of Habel, who divides the episode into (i) the divine confrontation (1-3, 4a), (ii) the introductory word (4b-9), (iii) commission (10), (iv) objection (11), (v) reassurance (12a), (vi) sign (12). How can the dynamic of such an encounter, with its various moments, help us to articulate the dynamic of human inter-relations? Rather than transfer the insights of person-to-person relations to the human-divine relationship, how does an understanding of the human-divine relationship modify and correct our understanding of the person-to-person relation?

⁴CHILDS, *op.cit.*, p.72.

⁵CHILDS, *op.cit.*, p.87.

⁶CHILDS, *op.cit.*, p.72.

⁷J. I. DURHAM, *Word Biblical Commentary 3: EXODUS*, Word Books, Texas, 1987, p.30.

⁸CHILDS, *op.cit.*, p.56. Italics my own.

lies in the 'institution of a relation with being beyond the totality or beyond history'.⁹ The prophet is related to 'a surplus always exterior to the totality, as though the objective totality did not fill out the true measure of being, as though another concept, the concept of *infinity*, were needed to express this transcendence with regard to totality, non-encompassable within a totality and as primordial as totality'.¹⁰ The prophetic experience is situated *within* the totality and history, but it disrupts that totality. Interruption leads on to disruption. Once the voice has fissured Moses' ordinary experience, Moses is summoned to respond. 'The story of Exodus 3 is characteristic of the biblical approach in joining the act of God's self-disclosure with the call for commitment from its recipient'.¹¹ In responding, 'Here I am' to the glory revealed in the bush, Moses becomes responsible. In evoking his response, the presence in the bush confers the 'ability-to-respond', and Moses *is* responsibility. 'The glory of the Infinite is the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away. It is the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the other, for whom and before whom I am responsible, of this very giving of signs, that is, of this responsibility: "here I am"'.¹²

Finally, God, in the burning bush, draws close, presents himself, but in such a way that he remains at a distance. The burning bush is not consumed. Because the presence in the burning bush is utterly beyond the comprehensive capacity of Moses, it remains 'beyond'. As Levinas says,

'The 'invisible God' is not to be understood as God invisible to the senses, but God non-thematisable in thought, and none-

⁹E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1979, p.22. Hereafter, TI.

¹⁰E. LEVINAS, TI, 22–23. For a concise explanation of the philosophical notion of infinity in the present context, see E. Levinas, *Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity*, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, M. Nijhoff, The Hague, 1987. The main point is that infinity is not so much a matter of distance, but rather that, even in his proximity to us, the other still remains beyond our possibilities of comprehension. The Cartesian insight, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, of the subject's idea of infinity is an insight into the fact that, in thinking the infinity, the subject actually thinks more than it thinks, for the *ideatum* surpasses its *idea*.

¹¹CHILDS, *op.cit.* 88–89.

¹²E. LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, A. Lingis (tr), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1981, p.144.

theless as non-indifferent to the thought which is not thematisation, and probably not even an intentionality.¹³

Using the notion of the bush which burns without being consumed, I should like to develop Levinas' placing of the person beyond the world of economic activity.

The consumptive self and the non-consumable other:

Emmanuel Levinas, in *Existence and Existents*¹⁴, contrasts the dynamic of eating with that of loving.

Let us take some time to look at the example of food; it is significant for us because of the place it occupies in everyday life, but especially because of the relationship between desire and its satisfaction which it represents, and which constitutes what is typical of life in the world. What characterises this relationship is a complete correspondence between desire and its satisfaction. Desire knows perfectly well what it wants. And food makes possible the realisation of its intention. At some moment everything is consummated.¹⁵

The need to eat is basic. Hunger drives all of us towards consumption, and there is a basic correlation between the emptiness experienced in hunger and the filling of our stomachs. For Levinas, eating manifests that structure of solipsistic or pagan existence which so often characterises life in the world. A lack within us is felt, and in filling that lack we are satisfied. Consumption is sincere. There is complete correspondence between the intention and its fulfilment. 'Life is a sincerity',¹⁶ devoid of ulterior motive. It is such a correspondence between the experience of a need and its possibility of

¹³LEVINAS, *Ethics and Infinity, Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, R. A. Cohen (tr), Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1985, p.109. (First published as *Ethique et Infini*, 1982.)

¹⁴EMMANUEL LEVINAS, *Existence and Existents*, Alphonso Lingis (tr), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1978. Hereafter, EE.

Edith Wyschogrod, in *Emmanuel Levinas: The problem of ethical metaphysics*, The Hague, 1974, points out that whereas in his later works Lévinas uses the term 'desire' to 'designate an effect inadequate to its object' (p.20) in his earlier works, such as *Existence and Existents*, 'desire', like 'need' is satiable.

¹⁵ibid., p.43.

¹⁶ibid., p.44.

being satisfied which is at the root of the whole economic order, with its market of supply and demand. A lack is experienced, a possibility to fill it recognised and grasped, and an exchange takes place. Such is the simplicity, the attraction of the force of Marxist philosophy, whose point of departure is 'economic man'. 'It situates itself in the perspective of the sincerity of intentions; the good will of hunger and thirst, and the ideal of struggle and sacrifice it proposes, the culture to which it invites us, is but the prolongation of these intentions.'¹⁷

The economic relationship is much to the fore today and human inter-activity is often seen to be grasped in terms of market economics; yet such an articulation of human relations is itself economical. While it is true that '[n]o human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy....',¹⁸ the notion of *homo oeconomicus* is inadequate to express the reality of human social life. Ultimately, human life 'occurs beyond economic activity and the world'.¹⁹ Any proper reflection upon the person has to be placed beyond the realm of economics, and situated in the realm of ethics, for ethics is first philosophy. The danger of the economic model is that it is ultimately destructive. In its ingestive approach to what is other, nothing remains alien and at a distance, but is enveloped, its own integrity swallowed up and destroyed in its being reduced to the same. Most basically, ingestion takes what is other and incorporates it into the same. As Levinas says, eating, as the satisfaction of need, is 'the first movement of the Same'. To engage in an economic approach to the world is to create a centripetal movement in that world where all that is other is drawn towards the self. 'The first movement of economy is in fact egoist.'²⁰ It is a life without transcendence, a pagan existence, a Heideggerian world. Through his economic activity, the subject draws things to himself, deprives them of their independence, depositing them in the interiority of the home, which is firstly that place of refuge and security whose purpose

¹⁷E LEVINAS, EE, 45.

¹⁸E LEVINAS, TI, 172.

¹⁹ibid., p.43.

²⁰E LEVINAS, TI, p.157.

is to be hospitable to the proprietor. The home is essentially interiority and exclusion of what is other; it is that place which I inhabit before every other inhabitant.²¹ 'In economy... there is brought about the totalisation of absolutely singular beings.'²² Economy is 'the human totality'.²³ The exclusion of the other person can have tragic consequences, for ultimately, the power of economics is that of reducing the other person to the status of a consumable, devoid of any exteriority. It is, in effect, an annihilation of his or her existence, an obliteration which manifests itself most clearly in war and hostility which, like consumption, 'destroys the identity of the same'.²⁴ To situate an other within an economic totality is not only to create the situation where Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, but also that in which Abel is murdered by his brother Cain.²⁵

²¹The classic philosophical articulation of such a subject-centred world is surely evident in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, where the world is presented as something which is there ultimately as a possibility for the subject's own being, and things within the world are ontologically defined by their relationship to *Dasein*. Speaking of the involvement of things (*Zeuge*) within the world he writes: 'The fact that it has such an involvement is *ontologically* definitive for the Being of such an entity, and is not an ontological assertion about it. That in which it is involved is the "towards-which" of serviceability, and the "for-which" of usability.' Using the example of a hammer, Heidegger develops the notion: the hammer is involved in hammering, which is for making something fast, for protection against bad weather, and this is ultimately for the sake of [*um-willen*] providing shelter for *Dasein*. 'Dasein is that being who is 'the sole authentic "for-the-sake-of-which"' all other entities are. (*Being and Time*, J. McQuarrie (tr), Harper and Row, NY, 1962, pp.116–117.)

One would have to recognise, however, that in his later work *Holzwege*, where he speaks of the power of poetry, the subject is called into question by the poetic word addressed to him. Mark Taylor, in *Altarity*, (University Press of Chicago, 1987), in a chapter on Heidegger entitled 'Cleaving' writes that, for the subject, to be in the presence of the poetic word, is '[t]o hear the "inhuman", "anonymous", "uncanny" murmur of the holy [which] is to become open to that which cannot be conceived, grasped, mastered, or controlled.... By "tolling" (*laŮten*) the "trace" (*Spur*) of the holy, poetry sounds the "death-knell" (*Toten-geläut*) of the all-knowing, constructive subject of modern philosophy.' (p.58) In recognising the power of poetry, Heidegger, in his later work, acknowledges the displacing power which the Other, by speaking, has with respect to the subject.

²²E. LEVINAS *The Ego and Totality*, in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, A. Lingis (tr), Martinus Nijhoff, 1987 (first published in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 59, pp.353 – 73), p.44.

²³*ibid.*, p.45.

²⁴E. LEVINAS, TI, 21.

²⁵Maurice Blanchot, reflecting on the biblical account of Cain's killing of Abel, asks, 'Why did Cain kill Abel?' Both were engaged in the economics of work and production, yet Cain maintained himself in an economical framework centred on himself, which admitted of no place for anything exterior to his own domain. Abel,

In the economy, every object has a price, and what is of value (always to the self and never inherent in the object) can be costed. Money is the 'universal power of acquisition'.²⁶ With it, there is effected both the reification of the person, his quantification, and his insertion into a system of exchange in which a price is applied to everything — the subject becomes a factor in an economic equation whose value is derived from within that equation.

In transactions there occurs the action of one freedom on another. Money, whose *metaphysical* significance has perhaps not yet been measured... corrupts the will by the power it offers it, and is thus a middle term par excellence. At the same time it maintains individuals outside of the totality, since it disposes of them, and includes them in the totality, since in commerce and transactions man himself is bought and sold; money is always to some extent wages. As exchange value of product it

however, offered the first-fruits to the Lord beyond. Cain affirmed himself as the centre of life, and God, as exterior, was second; Abel recognised the mastery of the Lord in his life, acknowledged his presence, placing himself in a position of subservience. Cain and Abel symbolise two differing orders; the economic order of Cain where the self dominates and others are seen as a function of the self; and the transcendent order of Abel where recognition is given to the other and response made. Two orders which the one world is not able to contain. Hence, the only alternative presents itself to Cain: either Abel can be accommodated within his world of the self, or Abel can be removed in order that Cain's world survive. And so the first fratricide — the model of all other murders — is accomplished. As Blanchot comments, when confronted with the other who contests my power of possession, 'the choice is dialogue or murder'. Blanchot continues: 'when Cain kills Abel, it is the self which, confronted with the transcendence of the other person (that which in other people goes beyond me absolutely and which is well represented in biblical history by the incomprehensible inequality of divine favour), tries to face up to it through recourse to the transcendence of murder.'

'But are these two transcendences of the same order, and what can discussion of them signify? To Abel, Cain says; with regard to that by which you claim to go beyond me, your dimension of infinite and absolutely exterior being, that which places you beyond my reach, I will show that I am I the master, for insofar as I have power, I am master of the absolute, and I have made death one of my possibilities.'

'It is because, for Cain, this infinite presence of Abel had become an obstacle, like a thing belonging to Abel and of which he had to deprive him.... Because the presence of the other to another is not welcomed by the self as a movement by which the infinite approaches the self, because this presence closes in upon another like a property of other people in the world, because it ceases to yield to his word, the world ceases to be big enough to be able to contain at the same time the other and the self, and it is necessary for one of them to reject the other — absolutely.' (*Entretien Infini*, Gallimard, pp. 86–87)

²⁶E. LEVINAS, *The Ego and Totality*, p.45.

acts on the will it flatters, and gets a hold of the person. *It is thus the abstract element in which is brought about the generalisation of that which has no concept, the equating of that which has no quantity.*²⁷

However, '[w]hat is possessed in money is not the object, but the possession of objects. A possession of possession....',²⁸ and it is this fact which contains the possibility of the redemption of money, for it introduces it into the sphere of redemptive activity, whereby it assumes the character no longer of being, as Sartre might say, 'pour soi' but 'pour l'autrui'.

The Priceless Other:

An economic approach to the world ultimately fails, for it fails to do justice to the subject. The engorged self, when it has eaten and had its fill, still remains empty, for needs rise up from the satisfaction of needs. Engorgement simply distorts the person. Weighed down by consumptive obesity, the self cannot rise beyond its self. Consumption is non-transcendent activity; its world is without transcendence; it is pagan existence. What nullifies the economic model is quite simply the presence of an other who refuses to be consumed and incorporated into the self's own world. In his or her approach, the other person still remains at a distance, and though apparently within our grasp, rests essentially beyond our reach — and thereby attractive to us. The acquisitive power of money is thus called into question, and ultimately rendered powerless by the resistance of the other person. As absolute refusal, the other person is without price, not because I cannot afford the cost, but because he or she is exorbitant²⁹ with respect to any power I may have, and outwith the economic order. Of all objects in the world which I can make my own, the other person is the

²⁷ibid., p.44–45.

²⁸ibid., p.45.

²⁹Such exorbitance is termed by Levinas *infinity*. The concept of infinity is opposed to that of *totality*. The totalising tendency seeks to incorporate whatever is other into some impersonal system embraced by an over-arching concept. *Infinity*, on the other hand, signifies the transcendence of the other person who is unable to be compassed by any thought or by any system, and whose very presence, as infinite, calls into question the possibility of comprehensive thought and embrative system.

one who absolutely refuses to be possessed, and who renders money, as the currency of an economic world, redundant.

This power to contest the power of acquisition and to overcome come it by rendering it powerless, manifests itself in the transcendence of the other with respect to us, which Levinas terms the *face (le visage)*.

[P]ossession itself refers to more profound metaphysical relations. A thing does not resist acquisition; the other possessors — those whom one cannot possess — contest and therefore can sanction possession itself.... The action that is beyond labour, presupposing the absolute resistance of the face of another being, is command and word — or the violence of murder.³⁰

In other words, things do not resist acquisition; faces do. Contrasting eating with loving, Levinas goes on to say,

Compare eating with loving, which occurs beyond the economic activity of the world. For what characterises love is an essential and insatiable hunger. To shake hands with a friend is to express one's friendship for him, but it is to convey that friendship as something inexpressible, and indeed as something unfulfilled, a permanent desire. *The very positivity of love lies in its negativity*. The burning bush that feeds the flames is not consumed.³¹

That human voracity and its satisfaction is not an adequate model for understanding what it is to be human is seen in the limited resource which nature now presents. The consuming fire of human need threatens the human life-world. The planet itself seems unable to bear our needs. But at a more fundamental level, the economic dynamic of need and its fulfilment fails to satisfy, for what the human person is oriented towards is a reality which fails to satisfy our hunger, not because that reality is inadequate to our emptiness, but because it is so much beyond our capacity to bear it. In our relationship with other people, what we seek is not the satisfac-

³⁰E. LEVINAS, *77*, p.162.

³¹E. LEVINAS, *EE*, p.43.

tion of all our hungers, but the joy of being continually hungry. We seek the presence of an other whom we can never consume, who refuses our consumptive approaches, yet, who in the negativity of their availability, feeds our desire by their incomprehensible presence to our comprehensive grasping.

The trouble one feels before the beloved does not only precede what we call, in economic terms, possession, but is felt in the possession too. In the random agitation of caresses there is the admission that access is impossible, violence fails, possession is refused.³²

It is important to distinguish between desire and need. Desire (*Le Désir*) is not geared towards sensual enjoyment (*la jouissance*); rather it brings pleasure (*plaisir*). Enjoyment, however, comes about as the result of a need being satisfied, and is the first sign of subjectivity, the first mark of humanity. Enjoyment can thus be viewed as a kind of egoism. Its concern is the subject, and the subject as a focus for manifold sensual experiences. Aristotle makes this point when he says in **Metaphysics, I** that the human desire for knowledge can be seen, at a first level, in 'the delight that we take in our senses; quite apart from the use we make of them, we take delight in them for their own sake...' ³³ Levinas himself says: 'In enjoyment, I am absolutely for myself. I am an egoist without reference to anyone else — I am alone in solitude, innocently egotistical and alone.... I am completely deaf to other people.'³⁴ In enjoyment I am completely caught up with the object, which satisfies me, and this satisfaction is enjoyment. Human living is not, however, simply enjoyment; it is pleasure and delight. The enjoyment of eating is complemented by the pleasure of good company. Need, and the satisfaction that the object brings, does not acknowledge the presence of something beyond us. Need seeks to incorporate the object we

³²loc.cit.

³³ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, Book 1.

³⁴'Dans la jouissance, je suis absolument pour moi. Egoïste sans référence à autrui — je suis seul sans solitude, innocemment égoïste et seul. Pas contre les autres, pas "quant à moi" — mais entièrement sourd à autrui' (*TI*).

intend into our own world. We want to make it our own, and when we possess it we are satisfied and happy. Desire, on the other hand, is not oblivious to the presence of the other but moves towards the other. Need is the anxiety which the 'I' has for itself (*l'anxiété du Moi pour soi*), but desire is called forth by an other. In his *Cantique des Colonnes*, Valéry speaks of '*désir sans défaut*', referring to Plato, who in his analysis of pure pleasures, discovers an aspiration which is unconditioned by any lack. This is *desire*,³⁵ and it is a desire for what is beyond, is metaphysics, a movement towards an alien outside-of-oneself (*hors-de-soi*), towards a yonder that is termed *other* in an eminent sense. 'The metaphysical desire tends towards **something else entirely** toward the **absolutely other**.'³⁶ Such a desire is constant, for it is a desire that cannot be satisfied.³⁷ 'The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness — the Desired does not fulfil it, but deepens it.'³⁸ Desire feeds on itself, bringing, as it were, new hungers. It cannot satisfy itself for its term is 'unanticipatable alterity'.³⁹ Take the example of the one we love. The more we come to know and appreciate the Beloved, the more we can call the Beloved our own, then the more is our desire fed. Love is an insatiable force, it is ever deepening itself. In this sense, it is absolute. The desiring being is mortal; the Desired invisible. 'To die for the invisible — that is metaphysics.'⁴⁰ One can hear here echoes of Augustine. In his *Confessions*, Augustine asks the question: 'What do I love when I love my God?'⁴¹ and replies:

Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order; not the brilliance of earthly light, so welcome to our eyes; not the sweet melody of harmony and song; not the fragrance of flowers,

³⁵See LEVINAS, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Fata Morgana, 1972, p.49.

³⁶TI,33.

³⁷TI,34.

³⁸idem. 'Le Désirable ne comble pas mon Désire mais le creuse, me nourrissant, en quelque manière, de nouvelles faims.'

³⁹idem.

⁴⁰TI,35. Such an 'invisible' is not to be strictly identified with God, who is supremely Other, but rather with the other person, for we are saying that each person manifests his own infinity which is utterly beyond possession by the self.

⁴¹Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 6.

perfumes or spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace. It is not these that I love when I love my God.

In other words, Augustine is excluding as objects of his love or his desire those things which appeal to his senses and bring him enjoyment. He goes on:

And yet, when I love him, it is true that I love a light of a certain kind, a voice, a perfume, a food, an embrace; but they are of the kind that I love in my inner self, when my soul is bathed in light that is not bound by space; when it listens to sound that never dies away; when it breathes fragrance that is not borne away on the wind; when it tastes food that is never consumed by the eating; when it clings to an embrace from which it is not severed by fulfilment of desire. This is what I love when I love my God.

Augustine is saying that the object of his desire is something which he can never possess or make his own: a food that can never be consumed, a desire which is never fulfilled. For Augustine, this desire finds its terminus in God, the infinite who can never be possessed or consumed by the one desiring. Elsewhere, he writes, 'You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke the barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance envelopped me; you put my blindness to flight.... I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace.'⁴²

For Levinas, it is not only God who approaches in transcendence; it is the other person, who, even in proximity, maintains himself or herself at a distance. The very visibility of the person bears within it an invisibility which attracts us and inflames us with desire. One should note the structure of this desire. It is **response** to a presence which offers itself to us. For Augustine, the initiative comes from God, and the self is addressed, and thereby displaced. The priority of the subject is contested. The other, as exteriority, becomes the origin and focus. To de-centre the subject is not to undermine metaphysics, or epistemology; it is rather to defend it by giving it a foundation built on the idea of infinity. Levinas' project is 'a

⁴²Augustine, *op.cit.*, X, 27.

defence of subjectivity (for) it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded on the idea of infinity'.⁴³

What this notion of infinity means is that, even though the other person is proximate in his or her presence, such a proximity contains within it a paradox. The very presence of the other person is in excess of our capacity to contain him or her. It is proximate transcendence. The other person who is *absolutely* separate from us is encountered within the world, in the context of economic life. The non-allergic response which the other beseeches us to make, the primordial invocation 'Thou shalt not kill',⁴⁴ is not sought on a disincarnate plane in some other world. 'No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy.'⁴⁵ The demand for welcome does not simply entail an openness of heart, but presupposes the concreteness of the home, which is now not only the place of withdrawal and recollection, but also the place of welcome and hospitality. Although the face of the other person reveals the other in his or her transcendence, such a transcendence happens within the world, in the context of economic life. The response which the revelation of the face of the other demands is a concrete and responsible response, which is justice, and it is 'justice which must save us from economy, that is, from the human totality'.⁴⁶ Justice is the concrete response which we make to an other person, not simply the other who presents himself to us as possible neighbour, but the other also who is unknown and unseen.

Money, whose metaphysical significance has not yet been measured:

Money is not simply possession; it is the 'possession of possession', possession of the ability to possess, the power of acqui-

⁴³LEVINAS, *TI*, 26.

⁴⁴Although there is the command 'Thou shalt not kill, which shines forth from the face of the other, the possibility of killing is not thereby removed. Moral imperative is not ontological necessity.

⁴⁵LEVINAS, *TI*, 172.

⁴⁶E. LEVINAS, *Collected Papers*, p.45.

sition, of making some object mine.⁴⁷ Insofar as everything has a price, it is subject to the power of money, whose language is the commerce of buying and selling. Insofar as money is not the possession of the object, but the possession of possession, it is characterised by delay and postponement. In possessing money, I project possession of the object into a future, but a future which contains within itself the possibility that it might not be *my* future. Money in the bank, as a future power of acquisition, belongs to a future in which I might have no part, 'for wise men and fools must both perish and leave their wealth to others'.⁴⁸ In this sense, saving can be redeeming.

A parallel can be made with work. In place of an Epicurean enjoyment of the moment, the one who engages in work postpones present enjoyment until a future time. But as future time, it is a time which may be without me. To labour (*travailler*) for some larger project or work (*oeuvre*) is to adopt an eschatology without any hope or liberation for self. It is 'to be *for* a time without me, *for* a time after my own time'.⁴⁹ Work, as postponement, is Heidegger's 'Being-unto-death', whereby I commit myself to a time in which I shall be absent, a time which is the time of the other. 'Work (*oeuvre*) is then a relationship with the other (*l'Autre*), which is reached without being touched'.⁵⁰ It becomes possible only in patience, in indifference, and with sacrifice and generosity. Insofar as work, understood as delay and postponement, is a refusal of present remuneration, it is liturgical, and ethical. Levinas quotes Léon Blum: 'We work in the present, not *for* the present.... May the future and those things most distant be the rule for all these present days (Nietzsche)'.⁵¹ Insofar as money is also the delay or postponement of possession, it is not simply the currency of the economic order, but is introduced into the domain of the ethical.

⁴⁷One need only reflect how the verb *possidere* (to possess) can be rendered by *esse* with the thing possessed being subject and the possessor in the dative. To possess is to take something self-standing and engulf it into another subject.

⁴⁸Psalm 49, 10 (Grail).

⁴⁹E. LEVINAS, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Fata Morgana, 1972, p.45 Hereafter, HAH.

⁵⁰E. LEVINAS, HAH, p.44.

⁵¹LEVINAS, HAH, p.46. 'Nous travaillons *dans* le présent, non *pour* le présent..... Que l'avenir et les plus lointaines choses soient la règle de tous les jours présents (Nietzsche)'

Work, then, and its products are not inalienable possessions but can be exchanged and converted into 'the anonymity of money'.⁵² By becoming anonymous, money is removed from a sphere which is strictly mine, and introduced into a domain which is peopled by others. What has been mine now has the possibility of belonging to an 'other-than-me'. It is this very postponement which is a characteristic of money, this present refusal of possession, which constitutes the very positivity of money. If the negativity of money is its acquisitive character and assertion of the self with its concomitant reduction and destruction of the other, its positivity lies in the possibility of economic justice to which it lends itself. Money, as the currency of economic justice, is the possibility of doing justice to the neighbour, for, justice is always recompense and compensation. To recognise the other as neighbour is to acknowledge the debt I owe him or her, and thus the relationship is always compensatory. With regard to the other who stands before me as neighbour and demands justice, money loses its power of purchase and becomes a possibility of giving. The other person who resists my power of possession and renders it powerless, who cannot be priced, who renders my riches inadequate, being beyond their economic reach, transfers money from the domain of destruction to the court of justice. Money is concrete, and insofar as justice demands a currency and love demands incarnation, money is a concrete power for effecting justice, and giving to the other his due. It is not simply power and possession; it is the possibility of economic justice. 'Money allows us to envisage a justice of redemption to be substituted for the infernal or vicious circle of vengeance and pardon.'⁵³ Money, despite its power of appropriation, can also be involved in the non-consuming dynamic of love rather than the consumptive dynamic of eating.

⁵²LEVINAS, TI, p.176.

⁵³E. LEVINAS, *Collected Papers*, p.45. Levinas does not want to lessen the criticism of money which has been made from the prophet Amos (2,6) to Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, namely 'its power to buy man', but recognises that the distribution of justice must, in some way, be quantifiable. Money, by which the quantification of the person is achieved, supplies the *category* for ensuring justice to others, precisely on account of its exchange value. There can be no justice 'without quantity and without reparation'.

The project upon which Levinas embarks is to create a new metaphysics, ethically founded. He writes,

Between a philosophy of transcendence that situates elsewhere the true life to which man, escaping from here, would gain access in the privileged moments of liturgical, mystical elevation, or in dying — and a philosophy of immanence in which we would truly come into possession of being when every 'other' (cause for war), encompassed by the same, would vanish at the end of history — we propose to describe, within the unfolding of terrestrial existence, of economic existence..., a relationship with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalisation of history but the idea of infinity. Such a relationship is metaphysics itself.⁵⁴

In his encounter with the burning bush, Moses experienced metaphysics. He was summoned and addressed by a reality which remained beyond him, and which was outwith the economical order of consumption. Moses responded, and assumed his prophetic mission. In a real way, the burning bush is a symbol for every other person, who is always and already there prior to personal initiative, who is always in excess of our capacity for containment, and cannot be consumed by our comprehensive thinking or action. That presence summons response, and it is only as response to the presence of an other that economics and its currency is redeemed. Beyond the economics of consumption there is the demand for justice, and it is only when economics serves justice that justice is done to the subject.

MICHAEL PURCELL
 45 Cocklaw St
 Kelty
 Fife KY4 0DG

⁵⁴E. LEVINAS, TI, p.52.

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